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SUBJECT: PANDEMONIUM ERUPTS AT PUBLIC HEARING ON OKHTA CENTER

REF: A. ST. PETERSBURG 0180

[B](#). ST. PETERSBURG 0130

[C](#). ST. PETERSBURG 0007

[1](#). (SBU) Summary: The June 27th public hearing on the proposed construction of the Okhta Center degenerated into chaos shortly after its start. An estimated 75% of the audience was recruited by authorities in order to stage enthusiastic public support of the project. Civic and political activists who demanded cancellation or postponement of the hearing were arrested by special police forces. Organizers however, insist that the hearing went as planned and was legitimate. End Summary

[2](#). (SBU) Several days before the hearings, civil activists in St. Petersburg received information that the hearing's organizers were recruiting "stand-in's" through Lenfilm studio. By 13:00 on the day of the hearing, approximately three quarters of the hall, which can accommodate 620 people, was filled by these hired "public representatives". Some groups wore pins of a fictitious NGO named "Novy Peterburg," whose web-site was only created on June 26.

[3](#). (SBU) When the hearing opened at 15:00, activists demanded that organizers cancel or postpone it on the grounds that participants were not actually members of the interested public, but individuals hired by authorities to support the project. They also cited procedural violations regarding the exhibiting of project documents and informing public of the date and time of the hearing. The organizers ignored the activists' requests and attempted to continue the meeting. At that moment, a group of about 20 individuals (members of Dvizhenie Grazhdanskikh Initsiativ, Zhivoy Gorod, Yabloko and National Bolsheviks) stormed the podium insisting that their leaders be given the opportunity to speak. The organizers refused and called special police forces, who brutally handcuffed and arrested about six activists.

[4](#). (SBU) Despite constant protests from a small part of the audience, the hearing went on with the podium now protected by police officers. Many of the speakers opposed to the project accused organizers of falsifying the results of the previous hearings and excluding critical comments from the minutes. The organizers did not respond to these comments or react in any way. The hearing ended at 18:00, and according to the organizers, was a success. Activists are planning to challenge the results in court.

[5](#). (SBU) Several reporters were also planted into the audience and later published stories and interviews with other "supporters." Following the hearing, a large line of people were seen collecting their payment from buses parked close to the business center where the hearing was held. When TV crews discovered what was happening, the remainder were instructed to receive money at Lenfilm studio the next day.

[6](#). (SBU) Comment: The hearing was a sorry example of civil

society in today's Russia. Required by law, the so-called public hearing has now been declared "done" allowing authorities to move forward. Public reaction has been muted thus far. Press coverage was light since the hearing was held late on a Friday afternoon. Despite recent criticism of current urban development policy in St. Petersburg by the media and direct accusations that Governor Matvienko is ruining the city with uncontrolled high rise construction, local authorities seem determined to continue forward with Okhta Center project. More and more observers, however, doubt that the Tower will ever be built. They suspect it is likely to follow the path of two other notorious construction projects: the High Speed Railway Station and Mariinskiy Theater-2, where construction has been halted and is likely never to resume. For now, it's a toss-up.

KRUGER